

URBAN REFUGE INTERNSHIP

US FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE
SOUTH FORK CONSERVANCY
GREENING YOUTH FOUNDATION

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DIANE RYU

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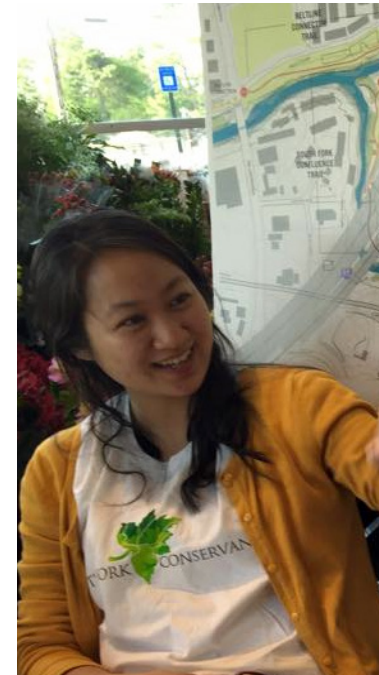


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Introduction



Beginning in January 2015, I was the Urban Refuge Intern for the US Fish and Wildlife Service. This position entailed learning extensively about the work of the US Fish and Wildlife Service, particularly the functions of the Visitor's Services branch. One of the main components of this position was working with a nonprofit organization in Atlanta, the South Fork Conservancy, to understand how signs can invite and inform neighbors about the importance of a critical natural resource running through Atlanta - the Peachtree Creek.

The following pages are not comprehensive of the numerous lessons I learned or inspirational mentors I met throughout this internship, but provide just a few of the treasured memories I will walk away with.

Being an Atlanta resident for the past four years as an Emory University student, I was aware of numerous social justice issues in Atlanta ranging from food deserts to refuge populations. However, this experience afforded me the opportunity to delve deeply into the issues construed around an imperative local water resource. Through experience, I discovered the opportunities for reaching out to community members and involving numerous parties for achieving a common goal. The following pages share my reflections of the various opportunities I took part in, and hopefully extend some of the knowledge I gained throughout this invaluable experience.





MLK

Day of Service

Clearing the Meadow Loop Trail
with the South Fork Conservancy

A buzz of organized chaos filled the air on a cold, early, Monday morning as volunteers began clearing a forest that will one day be restored into a meadow. Working in sync, groups balanced large trees on their shoulders to place cut trees into a growing trash pile. Others played tug-of-war against tall trees brandishing endlessly long honeysuckle vines, removing the rope-like invasive plant. Sharp thorns from briar plants poked through even thick gloves, but with large clippers in hand, volunteers fearlessly faced the deep rooted vines as well as small trees, snipping away the forest that effortlessly took over a meadow, and consequently, the meadow’s ecosystem. And in the midst of this bustling effort, our pile of trash continued to grow, and our clearing and vision came to actualization.

There is no day as fitting as Martin Luther King Jr. Day to dedicate to service. On this holiday



commemorating a man who mobilized citizens to act and catalyzed change through his vision of unifying diverse people, we proved the immeasurable possibilities that can be achieved in coming together as a community. As an assorted group of volunteers from organizations such as Jack and Jill, Hands on Atlanta, Americorps and the Greening Youth Foundation, we cleared a thick mess of shrubs, knots of vines, and countless trees to help transform a large abandoned area into a green space that can be enjoyed by local community members. We unified under the South Fork Conservancy’s mission of reconnecting people with a neglected resource in the heart of Atlanta and improving access to the Peachtree Creek.

Like Atlanta, so many regions around the United States and the world face environmental degradation. Countless green spaces are being polluted, degraded and urbanized. And while it is easy to proclaim this problem as “too large”, “too difficult” or not significant enough to confront, I am often awed and inspired in moments like this where individuals collectively show their dedication to preserving our environment, even on a day off. I am encouraged that this issue does matter to a diverse group of people, and particularly to so many youths. In working together and taking a step towards transforming this undervalued space to one that can foster appreciation for nature, we dedicated the day to creating a resource and hope for our next generation.

A Visit from Secretary of the Interior Sally Jewell

At the Martin Luther King Jr National Historic Site, U.S. Secretary of Interior Sally Jewell announced the launch of the Department of Interior's Youth Initiative with Mayor Kasim Reed and Lauren Koontz, Chief Development Officer of YMCA of Metropolitan Atlanta. Atlanta was selected as one of the first cities to receive federal funding to promote youth outdoor programs. Eventually, 50 cities across the U.S. will be enrolled in this program. After the announcement, all audience members worked alongside Secretary Jewell in planting rose bushes in the "I Have a Dream" World Peace Rose garden at the historic site. Dr. and Mrs. King's graves can be seen when standing on the Peace Plaza facing the rose garden. There are only five other World Peace Gardens established around the world including locations in California, Mexico and Italy.

As a resident of Atlanta for the past four years, I had never actually visited this historic site, one of the most visited locations in Atlanta. I could not have envisioned a better time or opportunity to visit this incredible location that commemorates a man who did so much for transforming the ideals of equality in America. Access to education, to safe green spaces and to opportunities are several of numerous current issues on the agenda regarding equality in America and there is no place more appropriate to announce how the Department of Interior's youth initiative will strive for greater equality than at the MLK National Historic Site.



Photos provided by the DOI

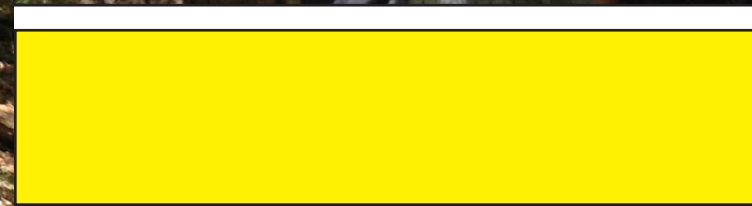
URBAN FOREST FESTIVAL

A little girl comes up to our binocular station, puts a pair up to her eyes and plays around for a few seconds. Then she looks up and earnestly asks, "So how do you turn this thing on?"

This question is not too surprising considering our current era, where technological advancements give even the most mundane tools an extra bell or whistle. Along with videogames and smartphones, children, as well as adults, are constantly in an environment of intense stimulation. I am inclined to believe that it is difficult, if not impossible, to convince people to slow down rather than speed up, and look for birds rather than free WIFI connections.

Therefore, I find it incredibly eye-opening to be a part of an outreach program, such as the Urban Forest Festival, that targets urban audiences. Seeing the sheer enthusiasm and curiosity of the children and parents alike is inspiring in many ways. At our "Learn how to use Binoculars" station, children and parents were excited to identify birds; even though they were only stuffed toy birds strategically placed several meters out. Another part of our station, led by the Ecological Services division, was creating seed bombs. Again, participants were enthusiastic about touching dirt and crafting something with their hands that may later benefit their garden or backyards.

The bird walk led by Kevin captivated the participants, who were attentively looking for birds, learning how to identify unique behaviors to locate birds, and mimicking the calls of owls. During this thirty-minute walk, my own perspective on how people interact with the environment changed. It is easy to be disenchanted with the way people disrespect the environment and often overlook easy steps to help (such as recycling). But I can now truly believe that personalizing an individual's relationship to nature does really significantly incentivize the desire to protect it.



Outreach Events

One of the greatest experiences through the Urban Refuge Internship was the opportunity to participate in outreach programs in various locations to a myriad of audience members. I presented to peers about the importance of understanding issues that affect water resources in our backyard at the Emory Earth Month Festival. I visited a UGA classroom with Sally and Kevin, and saw how Sally translated this information to be relevant for UGA students in an environmental urban planning course.

I got to understand the significance of trails for those living in the neighborhood as we presented information to locals shopping at the Whole Foods on Briarcliff. And I've also had the great pleasure of presenting to youth at Morningside Elementary, seeing how the complex issues of water sources in urban settings can be distilled and made relevant to younger audiences.



UGA Classroom Visit

Morningside Elementary-
Photo from SFC Fb page



My most memorable outreach program was an invited talk to a classroom for the Global Village Project. Global Village Project is an organization that provides middle school education to refugee girls who have had their education disrupted. Students come from a myriad of backgrounds and countries including Bhutan, Central African Republic and Iraq. With my own parents being immigrants to the United States, I found it especially rewarding to share stories of how I was inspired by the myriad of beautiful natural locations in the US to pursue a degree in environmental science. My interests have provided me with opportunities to explore the world and see it in the context of issues relevant to me – and I hope these girls will be inspired as well to do the same in the context of something that invites their passions.



Global Village Project - Photo by Molly Embree



How can we invite neighbors to explore and enjoy the newly established South Fork Conservancy Trails?

How can we transform a walk through the nature-infused urban trails into an educational experience – informing the public on a wide range of relevant topics from stream flooding to biodiversity?

How can we relay the overarching aim of these trails to conserve a critical water source for Atlanta?

These were just a few of the endless questions that initiated our signage project in January, as the three newly established trails – the Cheshire Farm Trail, the Confluence Trail, and the Meadow Loop Trail – gained momentum, traction and relevance in the neighboring community.

Our goal is to create four sign posts, each with six sign panels. These signs will inform the trail-users with necessary information such as location, distance, and rules while additionally, providing interpretive signs with information on water resources, flora & fauna, and the historical background of the region. In this way, the experience is personalized to individuals and highlights the unique aspects of these urban trails.

For inspiration, we looked to signs at Zonolite, a South Fork Conservancy trail established near Emory University. Community members commented on how the signs had invited them to use the trails, and the ways in which the signs transformed a previously unused land to a welcoming space. The posts reflect a synchronized style and design that relay a message on how the space is interlinked to the creek.

The issues facing the Peachtree Creek are reflective of water sources near any urban location. These signs can inform visitors about how humans impact the natural ecosystems and why it matters to change the current destructive paradigm. It is imperative to begin with small steps, like informative signs, to strike conversations about ensuring conservation efforts and tangible changes in urban settings.

I'm learning that signs are not just wooden posts telling people what not to do. They are an incredibly important method of communication and a learning platform. They require significant coordination between various experts in fields ranging from graphics to writing skills.

While the signs at the three new trails are still in progress, I believe their creation alone will express a desire for an audience. Signs, I realize, are an informational invitation to the community, and I look forward to seeing who will show up to explore the creek in Atlanta's backyard.



Sign at Meadow Loop Trail



Sign at Cheshire Farm Trail



Sign post at Zonolite
Photo from SFC Fb Page

Before



Visitors at Zonolite after sign installation
Photo by Tricia Francisco

After



The Nature Olympics

The Nature Olympics are a series of signs engaging youth in learning about local animals. Each sign provides a brief interesting fact on a featured animal, then invites the reader to participate in an activity mimicking the animal's natural behavior. While simple in design, they are a means of inviting youth to learn more about the animals in their own backyards. Furthermore, they encourage youth to be outside, use the trails and be active in the process. While simple in design, they show how signs can be catered to specific audiences and engage a myriad of audiences. The Nature Olympics will be implemented on the Cheshire Farm Trail.

During



PIEDMONT NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE

A VISIT TO A NWR WORKING TO PRESERVE THE
ENDANGERED RED-COCKADED WOODPECKER, A SHORT
DRIVE AWAY FROM URBAN ATLANTA

After stepping out of the car, we first generously apply bug spray to angles and belts as a measure of keeping off ticks. Soon, we are walking through waist-high trees – mainly young sweet gums and oaks trying to establish themselves before the next prescribed fire. As we arrive at a tall pine tree, I crane my neck up to look at a hole about 60 feet up, listening for the “dog toy squeak” that signals the presence of an endangered red-cockaded woodpecker. The biologist extends a long pole with a camera attached into the hole and the monitor shows exactly what the team is hoping to see – a few hatchlings and eggs signaling the growing population of red-cockaded woodpeckers in the region.

At the next cavity, the biologist physically climbs the tree, as the camera cannot go high enough to reach the hole. Within minutes, he has stacked enough 10-foot ladders to reach the 80-foot high hole. He peers in and confirms the presence of just water. At the next few cavities, we saw another filled with water, another with a few eggs, and two holes with slumbering flying squirrels that have taken residency.

The red-cockaded woodpecker is one a few bird species that is endemic to the United States. Because they prefer a very specific mature southern pine forest habitat, their numbers have decreased as a result of habitat loss. The Piedmont National Wildlife Refuge works to establish an ideal habitat for these unique birds, ensuring that sweet gums and oaks to not take over the environment by using fire to kill the saplings. Furthermore they will control the population of flying squirrels by removing them from the cavities, as the squirrels will kill woodpeckers and eat the eggs, and live in the holes otherwise.

It was interesting to learn about the extensive measures taken to ensure the survival of these woodpeckers and the amount of work that is invested into monitoring the populations. I learned a lot about the importance of keeping an ecosystem in balance, and the hard work of the Piedmont NWR team is really admirable and has incredible tangible benefits to conservation of US ecosystems.



U.S. Fish & Wildlife Photo



Northern Cardinal

Unlike most songbirds, both male and female cardinals sing songs



Carolina Wren

These birds are monogamous, and may stay in the same pairing for years

Tufted Titmouse

Titmice are one of a few perching birds that use their feet to eat - they will hold the seeds and break them open with their feet



White Breasted Nuthatch

Nuthatches will forage with titmice and chickadees - studies have shown that they are less likely to go to a bird feeding house if one of these species of birds are missing



Eastern Towhee

These birds are victims of the parasitic brown headed cowbirds, which lays her eggs in the nests of an Eastern towhee

Great Blue Heron

Hérons have patches of down feather with a special powder that will help congeal fish oil and slime so that si it easer for them to rake off of their bodies



Song Sparrow

Female sparrows are not only attracted to the sound of a male song, but the song's reflection of the male's ability to learn



Blue Jay

A blue jay's feathers are actually brown, and the feathers' ability to reflect light is what causes the blue coloration

10 Birds I will Never Forget

American Robin

Robins will sometimes flock to fermented fruits, and after ingesting, exhibit behaviors such as falling over while walking



House Finch

While native to western US and Mexico, the House finch was introduced to the Eastern US by a few captive pet birds that were released in Long Island, NY



Thank you so much!!

Thank you so much to Kevin Lowry of US Fish and Wildlife Service and Sally Sears of the South Fork Conservancy for being generous with their time in providing mentorship throughout this experience. From your passion, enthusiasm and intelligence, I derive a new understanding of environmental stewardship and a desire to learn more about the world. I cannot wait to embark on new adventures with a blue goose passport in hand!

Thank you to the US Fish and Wildlife mentors, Sallie Gentry and Garry Tucker, who always kept their doors open and found time to give insightful tips on National Wildlife Refuges, good local hiking destinations, bizarre foods to eat, and so much more. And of course, for teaching me how to use the laminating machine.

Thank you to Tom Tomaka of South Fork Conservancy, for coordinating volunteer events and always extending opportunities to me. It has been a pleasure to connect with the community alongside you! And thank you to Van Hall of South Fork Conservancy for generously taking the time to work with the graphics on all of the signs and being always open to suggestions.

Thanks to the Greening Youth Foundation team for their constant support and allowing me to hermit in their offices for a few weeks. Your mission is truly inspiring and the enthusiasm and energy from your team is infectious. Thanks in particular to Racheal Woods for connecting me to this opportunity!

And thank you to the countless people who have inspired me with the work they do, whether through helping conserve the red-cockaded woodpeckers at the Piedmont National Wildlife Refuge or through creating new habitat for Monarch Butterflies at the Meadow Loop Trail in urban Atlanta.

